

TAI CHI

I am neither a certified nor a registered tai chi instructor. But for the past few years I have been working with Drs. Fay Horak and Laurie King at Oregon Health and Science University's (OHSU) Neurological Sciences Institute (NSI) to develop exercises for Parkinson's disease (PD). The program, called HELP PD, has made some remarkable differences already in our subjects. The one-hour workout consists of 10-minute segments of six familiar physical activities; Tai chi is one of those activity blocks. Recently I have begun using some of the tai chi poses with music. Using music with tai chi is not officially sanctioned by any tai chi expert; but then again, I am not officially sanctioned myself. Putting music to basic tai chi has helped my clients master the weight shifting and mind-body awareness that is true tai chi.

Benefits »

- Practices slow weight shifts intrinsically cued.
- Encourages mind-body awareness and inside-out (kinesthetic) learning.
- Offers movements that can be done in multiple directions.

Set It Up »

You will need to learn three movements on your own. They are all simple movements, but it is beyond the scope of this book to teach you how to do them. Please consult other books or tai chi instructors if you need help.

- Prayer Wheel
- Tai Chi Cat Walk
- Cloud Hands

Prayer Wheels are weight shifts done in place, Tai Chi Cat Walk is forward walking, and Cloud Hands is sideward walking. When you are teaching these, at least initially, teach them without the hand movements. Emphasize slow, mindful weight shifts, deep even breaths, and upright posture (shoulders over hips, head over shoulders). Tai chi text describes the upper body as "riding a horse." The weight shifts are not a rocking, up and down vertical movement, but a transfer along a horizontal plane, from one foot to the other.

How to Do It »

Prayer Wheel

- Feet offset, shoulder-width apart, one forward, one back.
- Shift body weight from rear foot to forward foot, slowly, maintaining shoulders over hips.
- Add hands moving in the shape of a large wheel.
- Pretend hands are holding a 12-inch (25-centimeter) ball between the palms of the hands. Move the ball in a big wheel, between hips and shoulders, extending arms fully out in front, at hip level, then back towards the body at shoulder height and then back down to the hips.
- Add breathing cues:
 - Exhale out to mid point of wheel; inhale back.
 - Equal breaths for each turn of the wheel.
- Slow moves, upright posture throughout.
- Repeat 10 times, then change feet and perform 10 more prayer wheels.

Tai Chi Cat Walk

Tai Chi Cat Walk starts where Prayer Wheel leaves off. It takes the forward weight shift and turns it into a step, hence walking forward begins. To do the cat walk participants shift backward and turn the front foot out to 45 degrees. Then as they shift forward again, the rear foot is brought forward to take a step, landing heel-toe. Once the foot is landed, body weight shifts forward, then back again and the cycle repeats. Hand movements play a role, too, but they can be added later. When the movements are basically learned, but maybe not quite correct, try adding music. My favorite is Patti Page's *Tennessee Waltz*. It's slow and methodical; the weight shifts and foot turns just happen.

- ⦿ Shift forward.
- ⦿ Shift back, turn the forward foot out.
- ⦿ Travel (that's how I cue it, anyway. It means lift their back foot and bring it forward). During the traveling section, cue them to notice how their body weight needs to align over the supporting leg for them to stay balanced while the other foot travels to its forward spot and lands heel-toe.
- ⦿ New foot lands, very lightly, heel then toe.
- ⦿ Shift forward.
- ⦿ Shift back, etc.

Cloud Hands

This activity encourages slow sideways walking. The imagery is that they are walking on a bank of clouds, trying not to fall through. When ready, try the first few stanzas of Henry Mancini's *Pink Panther*. The music there has that perfect, sneaking quietly across a room feel to it.

- ⦿ Transfer their weight from their left to right foot.
- ⦿ Cue them to stand with most of their weight on their left foot. They should push hard enough into their left foot that they feel the ground pushing back at that left foot.
- ⦿ Slowly they release that push and they will feel their body weight transfer from the bottom of the left foot, up their leg, across their pelvis, and down the length of their right leg until they feel the right foot pushing against the ground.
- ⦿ Staying upright, lift the left foot slowly up and move it to the left.
- ⦿ Place left heel then toe on the ground on the inside of that foot.
- ⦿ Shift body weight to it, as foot rolls to its middle.
- ⦿ Begin transferring body weight to left foot, when it is fully weighted bring the right foot beside it, in toe-heel fashion.
- ⦿ Repeat 10 times in each direction.

Keep It Safe »

Keep each participant near a balance support. They will need it, especially for the walking movements, where they are on one foot for brief moments between weight transfers. For groups, long rows of chairs work great. Spread out long rows of chairs and put 2-3 people on each row. Then they simply move along with the chair backs acting as a handrail.

Live It »

Tai chi does a great job nurturing body awareness, deep breathing, slow mindful weight shift, body mapping, and upright posture throughout. Balance is felt all through each weight transfer. The magic of adding music is a great example of how music has a way of helping coordinate complicated patterns, making them easier, and making them happen with the whole body. It is a real smile maker!